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ABSTRACT

Case studies are presented of three African-American women who earned doctoral degrees in physical education and sport disciplines between 1971 and 1990. Personal interviews were conducted with the informants on issues related to the campus environment as well as financial and academic factors. The case studies are analyzed in terms of the women's enrollment decisions, financial aid, advisor relations, the need for Black advisors, and alienation and racism in the campus environment. The case studies revealed that personal qualities such as faith, determination, and political savvy were essential to the persistence of these African-American women, as these personal qualities enabled them to function successfully in a predominantly white environment and to cope with nonsupportive faculty members. The study concludes that, although doctoral students of all races need a substantial measure of personal qualities and support, African-Americans and other ethnic minorities in physical education, sport, and exercise have an even greater need. (JDD)

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Although long-time participants in higher education, African-American women have received little attention in scholarly literature. According to the National Research Council, only 565 African-American women earned doctorates out of a total of 11,368 degrees awarded in 1992 (NRC, 1993). Black women in physical education earned two to four doctoral degrees annually between 1983 and 1990. Their status has been portrayed statistically, but their personal perspective of the doctoral experience has yet to be explored. Why did they enroll? Why did they choose their doctoral institution? How were they affected by the racial climate on predominantly white campuses?

Procedures

In an effort to answer these and other questions, a multi-case study of six African-American doctoral recipients was conducted (three men and three women). This morning, the individual case study reports of the three women will be presented. They were chosen from a pool of demographic survey respondents–all African-Americans who had earned doctoral degrees in physical education and sport disciplines between 1971 and 1990. In order to view the doctoral experience from a range of perspectives, a demographically diverse sample of informants was chosen. The most recent degree recipients were given special consideration in the selection process to increase the likelihood of a clearer recollection of the doctoral experience.

Personal interviews were conducted with the informants. Issues related to the campus environment, as well as financial and academic factors were probed, but the informants were encouraged to introduce new themes and offer rationales for their importance. The specificity of the information in the case study summaries I will present today is limited by an obligation to protect the anonymity of the informants. In some instances, the data presentation is deliberately vague. Pseudonyms have replaced the actual names of informants and other individuals, illustrations have been staged by models, and doctoral institutions will be referred to as "the University."

Julia

Julia earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees at a predominantly white institution located in her hometown. During doctoral study, she was a physical education teacher at a local senior high school. She chose to earn a doctorate because she believed that it would increase her marketability, and enable her to seek a college teaching position in the future. The University prohibited students from earning three degrees at the institution. Because she did not want to uproot her family, she was forced to petition the University for admission to its doctoral program. After one year, the University Committee granted her permission to enroll under certain conditions, one of which was that she would have to pass a standardized test. She was outraged that in spite of her outstanding academic record at the University, she might be denied admission because of a test score. She took the exam five times before receiving a passing score. The experience made Julia an outspoken opponent of the way in which standardized tests are used to screen out students.

Julia's advisor, Dr. Fisher, was the only black graduate faculty member in the department. Although she considered him "knowledgeable" and "cordial," she felt that Dr. Fisher did not exhibit a commitment to the needs of minority students. This was one of Julia's priorities in her own classroom, but evidently it was not a commitment that Dr. Fisher shared. When necessary, Julia would consult her former graduate advisor, Dr. Klein, who is white. He had no official role in her experience as a doctoral student, but she recalled that he was always willing to answer her questions and give her feedback when she consulted him.

Although Julia felt that Dr. Fisher was not an advocate for minority students, she still believes that there is a need for greater minority representation among physical education faculty members. As ethnic minority professors bring their personal views and experiences to a predominantly white department, Julia feels they contribute to "a more well-rounded" faculty perspective. In her opinion, minority doctoral students should have a minority role model to lend support and guidance "because that person will be more in tune with their specific needs and model the behaviors that they need to adopt."

Julia believes that a strong support system prevented her from sinking into emotional depression and academic mediocrity. Despite her poor relationship with her advisor, she was surrounded by other individuals who provided her with personal support and/or academic guidance--family members, co-workers, Dr. Klein, black peers in the doctoral program, and a black female physical education instructor at the University. Julia acknowledges that completing the doctoral program would have been difficult without the support they provided.

Lara

Lara grew up an only child in a low-income farming town. She left home in 1962, and later earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in physical education from a historically black college. She worked for 13 years at a senior high school, teaching ninth grade physical education and coaching two sports. Lara was the only person in her department with a master's degree, yet she was never awarded a promotion. She became dissatisfied with the lack of mobility and boredom she experienced on the job. She felt the doctoral degree would enable her to seek a teaching position on the college level.

Lara enrolled as a full-time, residential student at a predominantly white state university, approximately 85 miles from her home and her husband. She was the only black doctoral student in the department, and she was several years older than her peers. Lara paid for her tuition, books and other living expenses with a minority scholarship she received for three years. During the remaining three years of doctoral study, Lara was forced to dip into her personal savings. She also worked as a teaching assistant, research assistant, and a substitute teacher.

On a large campus, where alleged intellectuals were involved in research and higher thinking, Lara thought that she would not have to face the petty racism that she experienced in the small towns where she had lived and worked. But she soon sensed that life at the University would be no different. Lara felt that the atmosphere within the department was "political" and that she had to "play the game" to win. She wanted to be perceived as a team player, so she adapted her style of dress and behavior in an effort to fit in with the white students. She believes that "personifying blackness" is sometimes the downfall of

many African-Americans in predominantly white environments. Politics also guided Lara's interaction with faculty, staff and her peers. She made a point of "getting next to certain people and staying away from certain others." Minor disagreements and occasional power struggles with other doctoral students were handled in private.

Lara described her advisor, Dr. Pines, as a "humanistic" and "non-adversarial" woman. Lara believes that although there are white advisors, such as Dr. Pines, who advise their black students well, black advisor/mentors would "provide more care and it would be much more rewarding for them to see black students succeed." Lara added, however, that the worth of a black advisor depends upon "how well-politicized he or she is." She believes that in a predominantly white institution, black professors without influence or political connections are no better off than the black students they advise. Lara said that if she had been assigned a black advisor, she would have been skeptical of his/her effectiveness.

Marie

Marie, the oldest of eleven children, attended a post-secondary institution in her country, similar to an American junior college. She then began working as a primary school teacher. An athletic scholarship enabled Marie to come to the US with her American husband, and enroll as a freshman at a predominantly white institution near his hometown. Her exemplary undergraduate academic record enabled her to obtain financial assistance for graduate study. She earned two master's degrees at the University and was awarded an advanced study fellowship that enabled her to pursue doctoral study there. Marie wanted to teach on the college level, conduct research, and create knowledge.

Marie believes that her greatest obstacle during doctoral study was racism. She had never known racism in her country, therefore she was unprepared for the experience. Marie was denied service in a local store although white customers were being served. Her son was subjected to racial slurs while he and his father, who is white, walked through the University campus. Professors in the physical education department passed racial epithets in her presence. She heard the supervisor of graduate teaching assistants say that foreign students were "parasites" because they used American money and didn't pay taxes. Marie's personal encounters with racism left her with an unfortunate, yet understandable pessimism about the status of ethnic minorities in America.

Marie recalled that her advisor, Dr. Chapman, knew very little about the societal issues that Marie was researching for her dissertation. Marie spent a great deal of time explaining concepts that she believed Chapman didn't understand. In the wake of a heated verbal battle between the two, Marie developed her research design alone–she received few substantive comments from her advisor. After her dissertation was complete, she accidentally met a black professor on campus, Dr. Jones. He read her work and gave her the feedback she had been seeking. Jones was so helpful that she considered him a mentor. Marie believes that black American students need a special mentor who would be sensitive to their needs and genuinely interested in their success. This person would not necessarily have to be black, but Marie admits that a black American mentor is desirable because his/her life experiences would be more similar to those of black students. She feels that most white professors are lacking in their knowledge of black life.

Marie received an abundance of emotional support from her husband, her children, and a brother who had come to the US to study at the same university. She gave them a great deal of credit for her persistence. Marie also believes that her athletic background influenced her ability to persevere in doctoral study. As a runner, Marie learned to focus on the finish line instead of the lengthy course. As a doctoral student, she kept her mind in the future–focused on the doctoral degree–rather than the painful present.

Cross-case Analysis

Enrollment decisions. These data suggest that enrollment is most influenced by professional aspirations. All of the women chose to pursue the doctorate in an effort to increase their job options and earning potential. Doctoral institutions were most often chosen for their geographic location–universities conveniently located in the city or state in which the women or their relatives lived.

Financial aid. All of the women received financial aid from their departments. Julia financed her doctoral study through tuition credits awarded to individuals who served as cooperating teachers for physical education student teachers from the University. Lara received a minority scholarship and assistantships, and Marie was awarded an advanced study fellowship. This financial aid served to reduce, but not eliminate, their reliance on personal financial resources.

Advisor relations. A supportive advisor is crucial to the success of a doctoral student. Lara enjoyed a productive relationship with her dissertation advisor, whom she also considered a mentor. On the other hand, Marie and Julia felt that their advisors were disinterested in their success. Both women sought academic advice from other professors.

Black advisors. None of the women had black role models or mentors within their graduate programs. Although Julia's advisor was an African-American, she believed that he did not support her academic success or professional growth. Each woman stated that the support of African-American mentors may have contributed to a more positive doctoral experience. (Lara qualified her statement by adding that black professors must be fully politicized and respected within the institution if they are to offer any real assistance to black students.) It was their belief that a black professor would be more nurturing, and would exhibit a greater understanding of and concern for a black students' problems.

Campus environment. Some black students suffer from depression, loneliness and alienation on predominantly white campuses (Clewell, 1987, Smith, 1980, Suen, 1983). Lara experienced loneliness because she was the only black doctoral student in her program, and because she was older than their peers. She felt that she had experienced subtle racism at the University, but that it was no different than what she had experienced in her own community. In Julia's opinion, racial incidents on her campus affected undergraduates more than doctoral students. She felt that she and her peers were mature and generally consumed by studies, work and families. Marie, however, specifically stated that racism was an obstacle in the pursuit of her degree. Marie was involved in a series of racial incidents which were shocking to her because she had never experienced racism prior to her arrival in the United States. Although racism is cited as one of the contributing factors in minority student attrition (Braddock, 1981, Suen, 1983, Wilson & Justiz, 1988), Marie did not allow her perception of campus racism to deter her in her pursuit of the doctoral degree.

As the informants looked back over their doctoral experiences, they indicated that their personal qualities were the primary ingredients for their success in doctoral study. As shown in this quote, Julia attributed much of her success to her faith in God and her strong support system:

> It's a lot better if you can find somebody to support you. It's just very important to network with other people who have gone through that experience. You need somebody to really talk you through it and steer you away from pitfalls that you don't even know are there. And first and foremost, (you need) a lot of faith and a lot of prayer because it will make a difference.

Lara's success was due to her ability to play politics, as illustrated by the following quote:

> It's political. You make the right moves, make the right conversation and act the right way. And you don't carry a lot of baggage around with you and personify blackness. It hurts a lot of black people if they don't play it just right.

Marie, quoted here, simply refused to give up:

> It's just like running–if someone is trying to bang on you, you have to go despite that, otherwise you'll be the loser in the end. You stay out there and you gain some respect along the way. You may be bleeding mentally, but you have to keep going.

Summary

According to these data, personal qualities such as faith, determination, and political savvy were essential to the persistence of these African-American women. Personal qualities enabled them to function successfully in a predominantly white environment, and to cope with unsupportive faculty members. They viewed their doctoral degree as a personal achievement made possible by their willingness to work hard and their refusal to accept defeat.

Although doctoral students of all races need a substantial measure of personal qualities and support, African-Americans (and other ethnic minorities) in physical education,

sport, exercise have an even greater need. Across the nation, all of the doctoral programs in these disciplines are housed within predominantly white institutions. The cultural environment on these campuses is naturally determined by majority individuals, not minorities. At predominantly white institutions, there are few ethnic minority professors, students, administrators, organizations or activities, consequently there is little with which minority students can identify. They must not only struggle through coursework and research, but they must also struggle to find a place for themselves in a culture that is not their own. This requires the type of personal qualities that were evident within Julia, Lara, and Marie. They were able to combat the depression that afflicts minority students on white campuses and reportedly contributes to minority student attrition.

Perhaps this glimpse of doctoral study from the perspective of African-American women will enable graduate coordinators, advisors, and professors to address the needs of their African-American students in a more informed manner. Hopefully, they will approach African-American doctoral students with greater sensitivity and empathy, fostering their personal qualities, and thereby spark their ability to persist in doctoral study.

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Informant Profile

Name	Year of Degree Attainment	Age	Stu. Pop. at Doct. Institution	Under-graduate Institution	Expenses Paid by Inst. Aid	African-American Advisor?
Clifton	1983	50	20,000	HBCU*	6%	No
Lara	**1989**	**46**	**12,000**	**HBCU**	**15%**	**No**
Marie	**1990**	**36**	**45,000**	**PWI****	**80-100%**	**No**
Julia	**1988**	**37**	**30,000**	**PWI**	**-**	**Yes**
Paul	1985	31	7,900	HBCU	50%	No
Gary	1989	36	25,000	PWI	0	Yes

* Historically black college or university
** Predominantly white institution